

“Why are you here?”

When I was on the Admissions Committee, we’d typically conclude our interviews by asking if the applicant had any questions. And, more often than you might think, those aspiring veterinarians would put us in the hot seat by inquiring, “Why are *you* here?”

After many years of responding to and reflecting on this question, I’ve come to realize why I’ve spent my entire veterinary career at Penn Vet, and perhaps why students also like it so much: If you can dream it, you can do it here. Nobody says, “You can’t do that.” They may say, “*How* are you going to do that?” Or, “Let me know when you get the funding.” Or, “Can I help you make a connection?” And on the Penn campus, with its 12 world-class schools, the possibilities for connection are limitless.

Our VMD-PhD Program has long partnered students with the University’s brilliant leaders in medicine and science, as you’ll read about in this issue. And more and more, our students (and faculty) are pursuing a wider range of degree combinations including the VMD-MBA. There has even been a dual-degree student focused on urban planning—envisioning the international cities of the future where people, animals, and agriculture flourish together. How cool is that?

These interdisciplinary endeavors extend beyond the classroom to dozens of student-driven clubs, such as the Veterinary Business Management Association—which was founded at Penn Vet and has since grown into an influential global organization. There are also clubs for animal welfare advocates, athletes, wine aficionados, and numerous other interests. All of this informs the collegiality of our community.

Penn Vet’s pioneering core-elective curriculum enables students to pursue their passions—and that kind of opportunity brings passionate people here. While admission has always been extremely selective, Penn Vet has also been particularly open to a range of backgrounds. As Alexandra St. Pierre, V’17, noted in her wonderful White Coat Ceremony speech (*see page 26*), Penn Vet students in her class come from the worlds of “criminal justice, mathematics, French, anthropology, and dance,” to name a few.

This diversity cultivates out-of-the-box approaches and unique paths in veterinary medicine. And, a veterinary degree is valuable for a wide range of careers with far-reaching impact, such as public health policymaking and international food trade. Our Student Inspiration Award winners illuminate the power of veterinarians to tackle challenges on a global scale. For instance, Lisa Gretebeck, V’15, and A. Nikki Wright, V’14, were named last year to *Forbes*’ “30 Under 30” list for their ongoing animal husbandry training program in impoverished rural Haiti. These types of projects elevate everyone’s sights and inspire us to think big.

I believe that our curriculum, while providing rigorous training in veterinary fundamentals, fosters independent thinking and innovation. And I hope that our students can apply their knowledge nimbly and creatively. I often hear from alumni that a Penn Vet education prepares them not just to know what is out there, but how to respond when a completely new challenge arises.

So back to that question: why am I here? Well, as a VMD-PhD student in the early years of the core-elective model, I had the flexibility to dig into my PhD work and focus on neurology and sleep research. I went on to study Bulldogs with sleep apnea, followed by fruit flies. With each curve in the road, Penn Vet has encouraged and empowered me.

Perhaps this carries a special resonance because I’ve been dreaming about being a veterinarian since I was eight years old. However, I quickly got the message that being a vet was not something girls could do. Thankfully, a decade later I stumbled on a brochure for Penn Vet’s VMD-PhD Program and—with key early support from Dr. Ralph Brinster—I arrived at the place that would become my academic and professional home. It’s a place where you can do what you dream.



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